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A Qualitative Study of Women's Apparel Disposal Decision Making

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Textile and apparel disposal in U.S. landfills has grown over time creating environmental concerns. With 14.3 million tons of textile waste generated in 2012 alone (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014), how consumers dispose of apparel is receiving increasing attention. In an effort to reduce textile waste ending up in landfills, this research addresses how consumers currently dispose of unwanted apparel. Understanding attitudes and perceptions associated with disposal of textiles may provide insight on how to raise awareness regarding other options available (Hawley, 2009). Previous research has interviewed participants at a specific donation site, (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009), but did not consider all disposal modes. Thus, there is a gap in the literature linking decision making to disposal modes chosen. This study intends to provide insight about the disposal process with the intent of identifying steps that could be taken to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the negative impact of clothing disposal on the environment.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, women between the ages of 30-45 were interviewed. Women in this age bracket were selected since they represent approximately 10% of the total U.S. population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). In addition, they were assumed to have established patterns of disposal, access to apparel storage and act as gatekeepers for the household clothing. A snowball sampling technique was used with participants being contacted via email. Ten interviews were successfully completed. Semi-structured interviews were arranged to take place at the participant's home, with most occurring in their bedrooms next to their closets. Prior to the interview, they were asked to select their 10 newest acquisitions, and 10 that had not been worn in at least two years. This approach was used to put the participants at ease within the comfort of familiar surroundings. Participants were able to use their apparel as a cue, connecting possible reasons or thought processes to choices they made. Extensive notes were taken as well as audio recording that was transcribed at a later date.

Results of this study focused on consumer decision making regarding apparel disposal as well as identifying reasons for modes of disposal. Motivations for initiating the disposal process centered on fit, change in style, and changes in lifestyle. A participant explaining her reason for not wearing a garment in years said, "... it just started pilling horribly so I don't really feel comfortable wearing it because it looks tacky." Additional fit issue mentioned by participants were represented by this comment, "I keep thinking I'm going to get skinny, because here's another one that's been sitting here kind of reminding me that I need to lose weight." Seasonal and lifestyle changes took the form of "I put summer clothes away, did I wear it, did I not wear

it? ... Am I going to wear it?" Another spoke to her decision making process as "I think about, could it have a happy life somewhere else? Is it still useable? I think about why is it still here?" Once the decision to 'get rid' of certain apparel was made disposal took place through donations, giving away, trash, consignment, and reuse. Donation locations were primarily Goodwill with a couple local donation centers mentioned as well (e.g. Assistant League Store). Participants described items that fell into this category as, "...look like they have been washed several time, so they're just not the same level of quality (to consign)." Giving clothes away to friends, family or acquaintances, especially within families, was primarily done with children's clothing, and not as often with the participants clothing. One participant mentioned, "I had for a long time, at least until about a year ago, a niece and a nephew that we'd swap back and forth." Trash was mentioned when the condition of apparel was ripped, stained, or as one described as "can't be reborn". Consignment was an option considered, but not by many; a couple mentioned it as a form of disposal but only to "to try and get some value back". Reuse, when mentioned, was primarily for rags, "I keep kind of a bag for checking oil in the car or painting, there's a lot of odd jobs."

This study contributes to our understanding of current apparel disposal patterns, and is a starting point to begin to understand and take action to minimize textile waste in landfills. Specifically, consumers could be made aware that items they want to throw in the trash may have value to other consumers or textile recyclers (Hawley, 2009). Thus, future research could explore how to alter consumers' perceptions regarding the value of worn clothing.

Limitations included only interviewing women, and could be expanded by including men as well as a broader age range of both genders. By including both men and women and expanding the age range, another study would gain even more insight into the disposal practices of consumers.

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